

6.  
*False Pretensions to Science pointed out, and  
true Knowledge recommended.*

---

A

1026. f. 11.  
6

# S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

AT ST. MARY's,

ON ACT SUNDAY, JULY 9, 1775.

---

BY RICHARD NICOLL, D. D.

Rector of *Drayton* in the Diocese of *Oxford*,  
and late Fellow of *Lincoln College*.

---

Published at the Request of the VICE-CHANCELLOR,  
and HEADS of HOUSES.

---

O X F O R D :

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS, M.DCC.LXXV.

SOLD BY J. AND J. FLETCHER;

BY JOHN AND FRANCIS RIVINGTON, LONDON;

AND THO. AND JOHN MERRILL, CAMBRIDGE.

**Imprimatur,**

**THO. FOTHERGILL,**

**VICE-CAN.**

**3 Aug. 1775.**

PROVERBS XIX. 27.

CEASE, MY SON, TO HEAR THE INSTRUCTION WHICH CAUSETH TO ERR FROM THE WORDS OF KNOWLEDGE.

**W**HEN the wisest of the Sons of Men addressees us, and speaks of a Subject of the highest Importance, it well becometh us diligently to attend to the Instructions which he delivers, and constantly to obey the Precepts which he lays down. And when Wisdom is the Subject of which he treats, and either the Methods of attaining true Knowledge, or of avoiding that which is false are pointed out to us, our Zeal in pursuing the Object ought to be in some Measure equal to the Excellency thereof --- But as Things the most noble in their Natures, and most sacred in their Institutions, are liable to be counterfeited or abused; so there may be a Species of Instruction, something which claims the Title, and borrows the Appearance thereof, which is so far from a Reality that it is only a Phantom, drawing Men from the right Paths into those

A

of



of Error or Destruction. Against this the wise Man in the Text is giving his Caution, "Cease, says he, my Son, to hear the Instruction which causeth to err from the Words of Knowledge." As if he had said, my Son, thou art now going into a World full of Temptations, where the best Inclinations may be led astray either by pursuing Objects that are wrong in themselves, or by an improper Pursuit even of those which are right. The Desire of Knowledge itself may carry thee into false Opinions, and the Tree in the Garden of Science which seems most pleasant to the Eye, and most to be desired to make one wise, may possibly yield a Fruit full of deadly Poison. This being the Case, it may not perhaps be an useless or an unpleasing Speculation to consider some of those specious Methods, which are sometimes too successfully made use of to draw us from the Knowledge of God, and the Practice of our Duty.

And here I shall not mention, nor does my Subject call on me to speak against Vices of the grosser Kind, which rather totally extinguish good Principles than draw us from them; and indeed the salutary Rules laid  
down



down in this Place of Education, and the liberal Studies which are followed in it, render Crimes of that Nature neither general nor frequent. I shall therefore only take the Liberty of giving you a Caution against some of those false Kinds of Instruction, which either intermingle themselves with true Knowledge, or else usurp the Place of it, by which the Ignorance of the unwary may be deceived, or the Integrity of the Ingenuous may be perverted.

One Method by which we may be drawn from true Wisdom, is an ardent Desire either of gaining that Knowledge which is too wonderful and excellent for us, or the more fatal Attempt to persuade ourselves, or other People that we are really possessed of it. ---- A Desire of Knowledge above what God originally granted them, brought our first Parents to Misery and Destruction; and the same Curiosity exercised in an improper Manner continues to be hurtful to us their Posterity. ---To this Vanity of appearing superior in Science to other People, we may often ascribe that perpetual Inconsistency, which is so conspicuous in all our Modes, both of thinking, and of acting. Hence it

is that we are not content with the common Ways of worshipping the God of our Fathers, but new Methods are to be thought of, and Arguments searched for to recommend them, every Invention being dignified with the Name of Improvement, and every Novelty with that of Reformation. --- By following received Opinions and established Customs, Men may indeed show their Piety; but they seem to think that the striking out of the common Path is the only Method of showing their Superiority. --- For this Reason also the Mysteries of Religion are to be looked into, and Things in themselves inexplicable are either to be fully explained or totally rejected; as if we were amazed that a Dispensation planned by infinite Wisdom should contain any Thing in it which a finite Understanding cannot comprehend. But the Disputers of this World will see the Causes, before they admit the Belief of Things; and will have the Evidence of Demonstration ere they condescend to give an Assent to any Proposition. Whatsoever their Reason, sometimes whatsoever their Fancy disalloweth, they brand with the Title of Absurd, as if Things themselves altered, or Truth ceased to be such, when our Apprehensions could

no longer trace it's Nature, or account for it's Causes. And even when Men cannot dispute the Principles, and dare not attack the Ground Work of Religion by bringing in such Heresies, as to deny the Lord that bought them; yet they may strive to obtain a Name among Men, by either adding some superstitious Rites to Religion, or else endeavouring to strip it of external Decencies. And the Observation which a sensible \* Writer makes of a former Century is found equally true of every succeeding Period. 'Nothing, says he, is more manifest than 'this Truth, that the noble Simplicity and 'Dignity of Religion were greatly corrupted 'in many Places, when the Philosophers 'blended their Opinions with it's pure Doctrines, and were audacious enough to submit that divine System of Faith and Piety 'to be scrutinized and modified by the fallible Rule of imperfect Reason.'

When Men therefore attempt to lay any other Foundation than that which is laid, viz. Jesus Christ, or to build on this Foundation Wood, Hay, or Stubble, their own



idle Conceits or vain Notions, both themselves and their Works will probably be brought to Nought ---- For while by novel Inventions Men affect superior Degrees of Knowledge, they fall into greater Depths of Error, and while they profess themselves to be eminently wise they become Fools.

Another Kind of evil Instruction, which recommends itself to us under the specious Title of Knowledge is false Wit, or the Talent of Ridicule, when made Use of in Matters which concern Morality or Religion.

Wit, as it implies a great Depth of Understanding, a penetrating Genius, or a discerning Judgment, is doubtless a Quality worthy the highest Honour. When it exerts itself in the Invention of useful Arts, or in the Improvement of any Branch of Science, it places us in a flattering Superiority over the Bulk of Mankind ---- But when it is engaged in relieving the Necessities, adding to the Comforts, or encreasing the Happiness of those around us ; at the same Time pointing out the best Methods and Seasons for effecting these Purposes ; it makes us approach nearly to that glorious Being, by  
the

the Imitation of whose Nature we arrive at the Perfection of our own. ' \* While our Wit is employed also to laugh Men out of Vice and Folly it is of Service to the World ; but instead of this it is generally made Use of to laugh Men out of Virtue and good Sense, by attacking every Thing that is solemn and serious, decent and praise worthy in human Life.' If by a lucky Combination of Images we can introduce any trifling Idea into our Notions of Virtue, or can fix any ludicrous Epithets upon her, we may perhaps render her, though amiable in herself, yet ridiculous in her Equipage.

The Power of false Wit and Ridicule was fatally shown in the heathen World, in the Contest between the comic Poet and the Philosopher of Athens. For in this Instance, notwithstanding the Excellency of Socrates, the Gravity of the Judges, and the Politeness of the Athenian People, yet, we know, that Wit triumphed over Philosophy ; and Raillery carried the Prize against solid Judgment.

a Spectator, No. 249.

Neither

Neither is Ridicule less successful in her Attacks on Piety and Virtue in modern Times, than in any preceding Period of History. For Religion still furnisheth Matter for the profane Wit of the Libertine, or is made a Subject for the Song of the Debauchee; as every Attempt is used in order to deride her Mysteries, and to condemn her Ordinances. When good Sense cannot but admit, when Reason cannot but approve the Arguments by which Religion is upheld, Satire and Drollery are the Engines most likely to weaken her Power, or to draw us off from her Defence. --- For this End the Man of Humour endeavours rather to please than to instruct; and to laugh at those Reasonings which he cannot confute; for which Purpose the jocularly profane Sayings of former Ages are revived, and adapted to the vitiated Taste of the present Times. And if by these Methods the Imagination can once be caught, even our Reason may be biaſſed to declare herself of the same Party. Hence it sometimes happens, that those who have Judgment sufficient to confute the Arguments of the Wicked, have not Resolution enough to withstand their Ridicule, but are  
by



by the Scornings of others, at length induced to sit down in the Seat of the Scornful. Thus they are not so properly brought over to the Interest of Vice, as laughed out of the Profession of their Virtue; and being led by their Passions, neglect or overlook the Dictates of their Reason, and Laws of their God. But let us remember that Wit, except good Sense directs it, is generally false Reasoning, and consequently an erroneous Test of Truth; flattering the Imagination, without convincing the Reason, and corrupting the Will rather than informing the Judgment. Of this kind of Wit, and the Laughter which arises from it, we may with the wise Preacher pronounce that it is mad; and with him enquire what good such Sort of Mirth doeth!

Another Method of putting Evil for Good, and bitter for sweet, is the mistaking bare Accomplishments and pleasing Qualifications for real Virtues. But this is putting a Quality instead of a Substance, and in some Measure setting up an Idol in the Temple of the living God. Little Minds, it is true, are mostly taken with little Things as being best adapted to them, and the generality of Man-

B

kind

kind judge superficially of Matters, and can pronounce only of the external of Things. The pleasing Grace therefore, with which a bad Action is performed shall sometimes palliate the Guilt, or atone for the Baseness of it. But we should recollect that we are sent into Life with Talents and Abilities to adorn our Nature by advancing the Interest of our Fellow Creatures, and promoting the Glory of our God. We are sent to fight under the Banner of Christ against Sin, the World and the Devil, and are expected to act suitably to our high Calling, and the Dangers to which we are exposed, that we may finish the Work which God has given us to do. When we contend for the Faith we must take the whole Armour of God, and if we are really desirous of Victory, we shall be less attentive to the ornamental Part of our Armour than to the Proof and Excellency thereof.

It is also ill treating Mankind to substitute any other Set of Duties in the Place of those which Religion requires from us, or to offer any other Rewards than those which the Gospel has graciously proposed to our Obedience. It is vain therefore to recommend

mend the pleasing Modes of Behaviour, or external Address, instead of those more valuable Qualifications, which immediately tend to correct the Morals, and to form the Heart, when all is right within, outward Elegancies may be easily attained, or the want of them easily excused; but if the Root is unsound or unhealthy, the Branches which spring from it will soon fade away for want of proper Nourishment. External Elegancies are employed in the best Manner when they are consecrated to the Cause, and employed as the Handmaids of Religion, and either administer to her Wants, adorn her Service, or support her Dignity.

Let this Queen of Heaven, as she is all glorious in her internal Excellency, have her Dress and Equipage equal to her Rank, and be cloathed with wrought Gold. --- Only let not our Attention be drawn off either by the Splendor of her Retinue, or the Beauty or Grandeur of her Cloathing, from paying that Honor which is due to her Person alone. And we may observe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is so far from discouraging an Attention to outward Accomplishments, if they are joined with superior Qualifications and



Virtues, that an inspired Apostle has recommended them together ; ordering us at the Time that we think on whatsoever Things are honest, whatsoever Things are just, whatsoever Things are pure, to think also on whatsoever Things are lovely, and of good Report.

The Word Honor also as it is used in modern Times, may by its false Appearance drawn us off from the Practice of moral Duties. For this is a Principle whose Foundation frequently rests in the precarious Opinions of Mankind, varying with the Times, and changing with the Modes of thinking which happen to be peculiar to them. It has therefore Caprice for it's Basis, more than Judgment, and for that Reason frequently opposes Principles which from its primary Intention it ought to support and maintain. It often springs also from the Pride or the Folly of Mankind, and sometimes arises from a mere corrupted Source. It's Actions also are too frequently destructive both of natural Benevolence and christian Charity, and <sup>a</sup> even when 'viewed in the most fa-

<sup>a</sup> Brown against Lord Shaftesbury's Charact. Page 203.

'vourable Light, it's chief Design is not  
 'so much to secure the Happiness of All,  
 'as to gain the Superiority of a Few. Hence  
 'this Principle has ever led it's Votaries to  
 'abhor the Commission, not so much of  
 'what is unjust as of what is generally  
 'called contemptible.' As this Principle  
 then is found even to fight against God, ei-  
 ther by undermining the Tenets of the  
 Gospel, or bringing in Notions opposite to  
 christian Doctrines, it can be ranked only  
 under that Species of Instruction, which  
 causeth us to err from the Word of Know-  
 ledge.

I might hint that the same Principle is  
 likewise found under the Name of Taste in  
 another Department, in which as it might  
 be more innocently, I wish it was totally  
 confined; viz. in the Article of our Plea-  
 sures and Amusements. A great Part of  
 those who move in the highest Ranks of Life,  
 seem to think they are sent into the World  
 merely to take their Pastime therein. ---- If  
 a Man adds any Improvement to Luxury, or  
 can luckily introduce any new Folly into the  
 Circle of publick Diversions, he is imme-  
 diately stiled ingenious by an Age, which  
 seems

seems chiefly to wish, that the Whim of the present Moment may be succeeded by some more glaring Absurdities.

Having thus considered some obvious Methods by which we may be drawn from true Knowledge, you are doubtless beforehand hand with me in determining what true Instruction is, and what are the most proper Means of attaining it.

That Truth is the Object most adapted to our Faculties, and therefore most worthy our Pursuit, is a Proposition which wants no Evidence to support it. Nature perpetually teaches us this Lesson, and Reason forcibly seconds her Admonitions. ---- But though they both pant after Truth, yet of themselves, they are unable to find it. --- For the Philosophers of old did little else but doubt or object, and in the Course of their Enquiries, frequently introduced new Difficulties without removing those which they had met with. Arguings produced Nothing capable of satisfying the Mind, but as they arose in Doubtings, so they proceeded in Uncertainty, and generally terminated in Error. And this Cloud of Darkness hung over the Earth  
till



till the Gospel of Christ appeared; that Light which was to enlighten the Gentiles, and to be the Glory of the Christian Israel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ chased away that Ignorance which had envelopped the heathen World, and introduced a System of true Knowledge to give Light to those who at that Time lay in Darkness, and to guide their latest Posterity into the Ways of Peace. That God whom former Ages had worshipped under the Title of unknown, was clearly and personally revealed; and those Duties are recommended to us by which our temporal Felicity is secured, and the Rewards of eternal Glory promised to our Obedience. This then is Knowledge worthy of the Attention of a Man, this is a Science worthy of the Study of an Academick. But lest this divine Knowledge should be little attended to through the Ignorance of some, or should be totally extinguished by the Wickedness of others, it is highly incumbent on us carefully to keep this sacred Deposit the Gospel pure and uncorrupted always. And as the Cavils of the Infidel appear differently, at different Times, we must constantly and diligently make Use of all the Methods which human Learning affords us,  
in

in order to support the Credit, to illustrate the Truths, and adorn the Doctrines of the Gospel. For this Purpose Histories are to be compared, Customs explained, Languages understood, Metaphors cleared, Idioms ascertained, Precepts inforced, Motives urged, and Affections excited. The Beauties of Language also are to be attended to, and studied by us, and we must borrow of heathen Authors their Jewels of Silver, and their Jewels of Gold, the Dignity of their Sentiments, and the Elegance of their Expressions, and consecrate them to the Service of the living God.

But above all Things let us trust in the Lord with all our Hearts, and not lean too much or entirely depend on our own Abilities, let us beg of God to give us Grace together with Wisdom and Understanding.

This will be the best Method of obtaining the assistance of his holy Spirit, this will be the best Proof and Evidence that we have already obtained a Portion thereof. And we may be farther assured that those whom God has mercifully guided with his Counsel here, he will graciously receive into his Glory hereafter.

F I N I S.

